

Genesis 1:1-5(ESV) ¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalms 29:1(ESV) ¹Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. ²Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness. ³The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters. ⁴The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. ⁵The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. ⁷The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. ⁹The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, “Glory!” ¹⁰The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. ¹¹May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Romans 6:1-11(ESV) ¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Rev. Gary Lewis Hendrickson

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Lutheran Church

1st Sunday after the Epiphany

Close to the Real Thing

Mark 1:4 - 11 (ESV) ⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Fifteen years ago, the headline on the sports page of the newspaper read, “Forever Young!” An uninformed person might make the mistaken assumption that there was some sort of article in the paper about how a person might stay young or hold on to their youth. But to sports fans of the day, they knew immediately what the headline was implying. There was no new “Fountain of Youth” to read about in this article; instead, it was a story about an incredibly special football player, the Texas Long Horns’ quarterback, Vince Young. The headline appeared after Texas beat USC for the national football championship. “Forever Young” was an allusion to how instrumental this quarterback was to his team winning that game. His outstanding play earned him the title-for-a-day of “Forever Young.”

What makes a person into such a celebrity that so many folks want to be around that individual? In Young’s case, he could throw a football with amazing accuracy and run through the tackles of the opposition with apparent ease. Sports stars, music stars, film stars, political stars, and plain everyday heroes and heroines burst into the headlines of television and newspapers every day. Why are they so popular as compared to most other folks? They are in the headlines because they can do something better than most, if not all, other people. They are admired—almost idolized—for what they can do, or for what they have done. The popularity of these stars and heroes stimulates the interest and imaginations of countless folks. These celebrities draw fans to themselves like metal to a magnet. There is no doubt that famous people can easily draw a crowd—even in church. Some churches frequently use celebrities to draw large numbers of people to their worship services.

John the Baptizer was a celebrity, of sorts, just before Jesus began His public ministry. John’s popularity was known far and wide throughout the Holy Land. So well known was John—and such a curiosity item—that he did not have to travel to seek out an audience. Instead, the audience apparently willingly and gladly traveled 20 or more miles just to see John and hear what he had to say. Those who responded to John’s message also underwent a baptism of repentance in the Jordan River. Even those who were not much interested in John’s baptism still came out to hear what he had to say, firsthand. Many perceived John to be a prophet; others saw him primarily as a “pain-in-the-neck” person who riled people up with his preaching.

For us today, traveling 20 miles to see someone is not a long trip. We would just jump in our cars and be there in less than a half an hour. But 20 miles was a whole day’s journey back in John’s time. The people came out to see John from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. At the closest point, the Jordan River is 20 miles from Jerusalem, so many folks likely traveled farther than 20 miles to see and hear John. We don’t know how long the people remained with John, but their listening to his preaching and then waiting to be baptized took some time—perhaps all day. That means a day of traveling to get there, a day to hear and respond to the John’s proclamation, and another day to get back home. Just how famous or important would someone have to be for you to spend three days of your life just to see him personally and hear what he was saying?

Perhaps if we thought, as did many common folks of John’s day, that there was a genuine prophet of God available today—we might be willing to rearrange our schedules so that we could have three days to hear what this prophet had to say. It could be that folks might be even more willing to part with three days of their time if they thought they may be going to see the Messiah. Israel had not seen a prophet for more than 400 years by the time John came on the scene. The Israelites had heard stories about the prophets of old their entire lives. An opportunity to see a prophet in the flesh was

probably just too compelling for a lot of people to pass up. Even the religious leaders of the day were somewhat curious about John. They wanted to know who or what he claimed to be.

Today a self-proclaimed prophet of God would not be anywhere near as much of a draw for believers as John was. We have so many religious fanatics tooting their own horns around our country that we would not likely go out of our way to hear any of them. However, people who are not all that well connected to the church do go out and listen to these fanatics. Not only do these folks listen, but they also become avid followers. We've seen any number of religious cults in this country. Typically, each one has a very charismatic leader who can entice people into following him. People follow this leader because they believe that he has the answers—the answers to life, the answers to death, the answers to whatever is troublesome to these people.

Not everyone who came out to see and hear John eventually found Jesus. From John's message, we know that he was continuously pointing everyone toward Jesus. John never claimed to be an end in himself—a lasting draw for people. John had a mission—a job—to complete. He was to prepare the way for the Messiah and point people in the right direction so that they could experience the love and mercy that Jesus brought into the world. Some folks wanted John to be the end of their search; they were not interested in going any further. With John, they were Close to the Real Thing—but, sad to say, they never found the real thing in Jesus. Others rejected John's proclamation and thus paid no attention to the person to whom John was pointing. They, too, had been close to the real thing—but they missed out as well.

In our times, quite a few folks get close to the real thing, but that is about as far as they get. They follow some bogus charismatic leader who is doing more pointing to himself than to the Lord Jesus. Others are attracted to one of the many anti-Christian cults that have become so popular. They hear a partial story about God—but the rest of the story—the part about personal salvation only in Jesus Christ remains mostly hidden from them. They are taught only that which supports and benefits the beliefs and practices of the cult. They know a little bit about Jesus, but not enough to be saved. In life, many are pointing the way that they think we ought to be following. Sad to say, most of these folks are pointing others in the wrong direction. Only the guides who point us toward Jesus are the true prophets of today. All others are the bogus guides and false prophets.

The picture that Scripture reveals to us about John is indeed an exciting adventure. Forged in the mold of the prophets of old, John appears not in the Temple courts—where many would expect a prophet of God to appear—but rather in the wilderness. Not only does John have an unexpected message for the people of his day—"After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"—he also appears to be fearless in the pursuit of that proclamation. John does not back off when he ruffles the arrogant pride of the Pharisees or Sadducees (Matthew 3:7). He doesn't even back off when he confronts King Herod about his sinful lifestyle (Mark 6:18). How long would many of the charismatic religious leaders we see on television today last if our government had the power and threatened to lop off their head if they did not stop their preaching? We would expect that all the bogus ones would stop abruptly. False prophets are typically not ready to lay down their lives for what they believe. John, just like Jesus Christ, was ready to do exactly that.

John fulfilled his calling by preparing the way for the coming of Jesus—by pointing the masses that came out to see him to the One who would come after him. How do we know that John completed the task entrusted to him? Because Jesus Himself said, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of

women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). John was faithful in doing the work that the Lord had given him to do. Those who saw John, listened to his message, and responded in repentance to be baptized were Close to the Real Thing in God’s prophet. In Jesus, the Real Thing has come! Jesus is what all the prophets were about. Only in Him, with Him, and through Him is salvation found. Jesus is the Real Thing.